ILLINOIS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND
ITS
HISTORY and PHILOSOPHY
by
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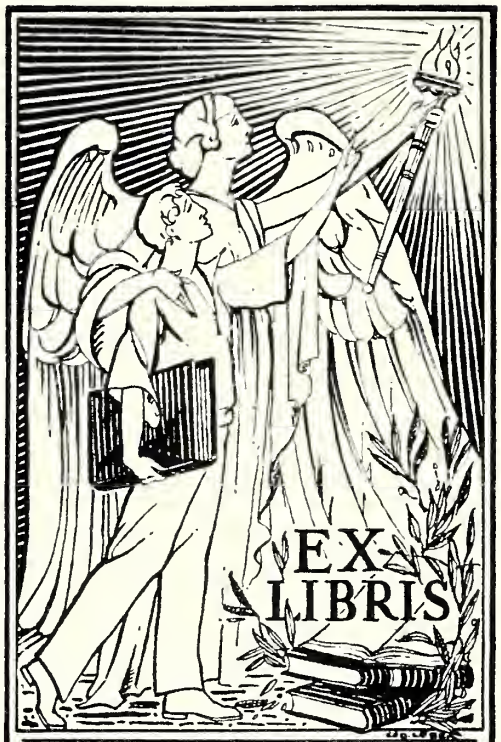

# ILLINOIS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

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# HISTORY and PHILOSOPHY

Already, in 1847, eighteen years had passed since the founding of Illinois College in the wilderness community of Jacksonville. In the meantime the Illinois Female Academy and the first school of medicine in the West had been opened in the same place. Brilliant, generous, and far seeing men had founded these institutions, and had gathered to themselves others like them who were eager to foster the tradition of Jacksonville, - "The Athens of the West."

In this year Samuel Bacon, graduate, and, for one year, "pupil teacher" at the Ohio Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, decided that his fortune was to be made in the West. Down the Ohio and up the Mississippi river he came on a steamboat, intending to go to Galena, Illinois. Of the several persons on the boat with whom he talked, one told him of a rumor that a school for the blind was to be started in Jacksonville. Bacon, hoping to find work as teacher at the new school, turned his footsteps thither. His disappointment must have been great upon reaching his destination, to find that it was a hospital for the insane instead of a school for the blind which was proposed. Luckily, however, he was afforded an opportunity of meeting many of the foremost citizens of the community with whom he discussed the need of a school for the blind in Illinois. By them he was encouraged to make a beginning. Hearing of blind children in Lynnville, he went

on foot to visit them, walking the ten miles each way alone. Soon after this he made a trip to Springfield, meeting there many prominent men of the state. With these also he discussed the need of a school for the blind and was told that the state was in poor financial condition to back such a project. During several months he continued to gather information and to spread the desire for a school.

On April 1, 1848, a meeting of interested citizens was held in the office of Brown and Yates on the east side of the public square in Jacksonville, to discuss the proposition. A committee was formed and officers appointed--Dr. English, superintendent of the enterprise; J. O. King, collector and treasurer; and Judge Berdan, secretary. Mr. Bacon was urged to continue his work of gathering information and stimulating public opinion and was asked to open, as soon as possible, a private school for the blind in Jacksonville. A subscription list was drawn up, whereby a number of persons agreed to contribute sums of money for the undertaking. The original papers of this meeting have been lost, so information about it is meager.

Mr. Bacon now intensified his efforts both of investigation and propaganda, traveling two thousand miles over the state on foot, by stage, on horseback, by boat, and by wagon. He returned with a list of names of sixty blind children, most of whom he had visited. From this list the names of four prospective students were taken; they were brought to Jacksonville and school was begun on June 5, 1848, in a two-story building on grounds now occupied by the Wabash depot.

Of this school, Mr. Bacon was teacher; Mrs. Sarah Graves, matron; and her daughter, Miss Sarah Graves, reader. The pupils were George Springer, John Jones, and Joseph and Nancy Fielding. This group was taken for the purpose of experimenting with methods, for later demonstration, and "to prove that it was worth while to attempt to educate the blind."* They were taught music, especially choral; arithmetic, including fractions; and geography, for which no maps were available.

This group of pupils was taken to Springfield, and exhibited before the Legislature on January 9, 1849. On the following day, a bill--drawn up by Judge William Thomas, introduced by Honorable Richard Yates, and entitled "An act to establish the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind"--was passed by both Houses. On January 13, this bill was approved and signed by Governor Augustus C. French.

The preparatory work which had been done thus far had cost the citizens of Jacksonville over four hundred dollars, as well as much time and effort. In recognition of this fact, it was provided that the school should be opened and continued in or near Jacksonville, and five Morgan County men were named as Trustees. On February 3, 1849, just twenty-one days after the bill became a law, the Board met and organized. Judge Samuel D. Lockwood was elected President of the Board; Judge James Berdan, Secretary; and Mr. Bacon was appointed principal of the school at a salary of $600 per year. It was decided to open school on the first

*A Brief History of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind, p. 9.

Monday in April if suitable quarters could be obtained. Col. Dunlap's "Mansion House," situated a little south and west of Illinois College, was rented for $225 a year. Five hundred circulars were printed, announcing the opening of the school, and were distributed as widely as possible among the friends of the blind.

The school was officially opened at the "Mansion House" on the appointed Monday, but no students arrived. George Springer and Mary Stuart came the following Saturday, April 7, and were duly enrolled. Thus the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind was the third state institution in Illinois to be provided for by law, and the second to open its doors. It is interesting to note that all institutions founded by the state before the Civil War were located in Jacksonville.

The first term of school continued without interruption for fifteen months--from April, 1849, to July, 1850. By July 2, 1849, fourteen students had enrolled and there were twenty-three present at the end of the summer. Mr. Arron Rose and Miss Lavinia Booth, both blind, were appointed to teach music and handicraft respectively. Mr. Bacon, near the end of the term, was allowed a grant of one hundred dollars for the purpose of making a survey of work in the eastern schools for the blind. However, soon after, because of a misunderstanding about their salaries, not only Miss Booth and Mr. Rose, but Mr. Bacon also, tendered their resignations, which were accepted. Mr. Rose was later reinstated

by his own request. Mr. Dennis Rockwell, one of the Trustees, was asked to make the survey of eastern schools. He was not only to investigate methods and procure equipment, but was instructed by his fellow Board members to hire a new superintendent--"a seeing man experienced in the conduct of a blind school."*

After leaving Jacksonville, Mr. Bacon was instrumental in the founding of two more schools for the blind--the Iowa school at Vinton and the Nebraska school at Nebraska City. He later retired to a farm which he had purchased, not far from the latter school, and there died--a proof that blindness need not be a bar to financial success.

The bill entitled "An act to establish the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind" provided that there should be levied annually a tax of one-tenth of a mill upon every dollar's worth of taxable property in the state, the proceeds of which were to be paid over to the school for its support. At the same time an appropriation of $3000 was made for the purpose of providing a suitable school building. A tract of 22.45 acres, located about three-fifths of a mile east of the public square, was purchased for $75 per acre from the Col. Hardin estate. Plans were drawn, and work was begun on the building in September, 1849. Construction of the new school building progressed very slowly and it was not until January, 1854, that the institution was able to move into its new home, though the

*I.B.I.D., page 11

structure was not completed even then.

Mr. Rockwell secured, to fill the post of superintendent, Dr. Joshua Rhoads, formerly head of the Pennsylvania School. Mrs. Rhoads was installed as matron. School opened for its second term in October, 1850, at the "Mansion House". Eighteen pupils were enrolled at the beginning of this term, but by January, 1851, twenty-three were present. It was then decided that no more students could be admitted because the accommodations were inadequate for a larger number. During the second term Mr. Rose taught music; the superintendent taught literary work; and Mrs. Rhoads gave the girls instruction in sewing, knitting, and bead work. At this time, a bill was passed by the Legislature providing for the levy, for two years, of a tax of one-tenth of a mill on every dollar's worth of taxable property in the state to raise additional money needed for the completion of the school building.

During the third term, opening in 1851, the new building being far from finished and the "Mansion House" again crowded, Dr. Rhoads taught industrial trades to the men, including brush making, basketry, and rope making. In January, 1853, twenty-five students were in attendance--thirty-three having been enrolled since the first opening of the school.

With the final completion of the building and its equipment in January, 1855, it was again announced that the institution would accept all blind children from Illinois who wished to enroll. In the same year the tax levy for the

support of the school was repealed and an appropriation of $14,000 per annum was made to replace it. Up to this time the total amount spent on the school, both from the taxes and from appropriations, was $99,431. A shop building was constructed on the site of the present east wing, at a cost of $4000. Fifty-six pupils were in attendance at the institution in January, 1857. This same year a law was passed which provided that when the parents of a student, either because of the death or the poverty thereof, were unable to provide him with suitable clothing the school should procure what was required and send a bill for the cost to the student's home county. A message was sent to all newspapers in the state requesting them to publish a notice to the effect that the school was now open to all blind children in Illinois. It had become customary for the superintendent, every two years, to take a group of children, usually twelve in number, on a tour through the principal cities of the state for the purpose of exhibiting and demonstrating the work of the institution. During several years a litigation was carried through the courts by which a railroad company sought to obtain use of a portion of the school ground. This the school opposed but was at last compelled to relinquish a strip at the west side of its tract. In 1859, by act of the Legislature, the amount of the appropriation for the support of the institution was reduced from $14,000 to $12,000 per year. In 1861 it was decided that the length of time that a student might remain

in the school should be limited to five years unless the Board of Trustees should, for good and sufficient reason, see fit to permit a longer stay.

In 1864, Dr. Rhoads reported: "This institution now contains sixty-eight blind persons of good moral character, kindly in their deportment to their teachers and to each other. About half of the number were either born blind or lost their sight in infancy; the other half of them became blind from various accidents to which all are subject. Thirty-two of the pupils are males and thirty-six are females."*

Between 1865 and 1869 the annual provision for the support of the school amounted to $20,000; in 1869 the appropriation was raised to $25,000, with $5,000 additional for repairs and improvements.

At about ten o'clock on the morning of April 20, 1869, fire broke through the roof of the school building in several places. It was soon evident that the structure was doomed and all efforts were concentrated on the removal of students and equipment. No one received serious injury; some of the papers and much of the equipment were saved. Friends and neighbors, led by Mrs. Eliza Ayers, offered their homes for the temporary accommodation of the pupils, and use of a building was obtained, in which classes were continued almost without interruption. With the insurance payment of $20,000 and other available funds, plans were

*Ibid, p. 16.

drawn and work of rebuilding was begun almost immediately. This structure, which was designed to become the west wing of a larger building, progressed rapidly and was ready for occupancy by the following January.

In 1873 the Legislature passed a bill appropriating $75,000 for the purpose of erecting the central portion of the present Main Building. Work progressed well, and the edifice was completed and equipped without delay. In 1874, because of a statutory change in the residential requirements for Trustees, it was necessary to appoint an almost entirely new Board. At their last meeting, the old Board passed several resolutions, commending members of the staff and others for their cooperation, among which was the following--"Resolved that we with pleasure express our satisfaction in the progress of the pupils of the institution during the past term, and commend them to the public as worthy objects of public care, deserving the same by good conduct and entitled hereto as children of the great state of Illinois."* This same year Dr. Rhoads, after twenty-four years of service, resigned the superintendency because of failing health, and Dr. F. W. Phillips was appointed to succeed him. One hundred and seven pupils attended during this term.

As the institution continued to grow, increased accommodations became necessary. In 1882 Dr. Phillips secured money from the Legislature and built the present

*Ibid, p. 24.

east wing of the Main Building. Other buildings, for shop use, were also constructed. In 1884 the pupils in the school numbered one hundred and sixty-eight.

Dr. Phillips died suddenly in January, 1888, after fourteen years as superintendent. The Board of Trustees, among other items of commendation in his honor, spread in its report the following: "His heart was filled with sympathy for those whose misfortunes have made them the worthy recipients of this noble public charity."*

Mr. W. S. Phillips was elected in May, 1888, to succeed his father, Dr. F. W. Phillips, as superintendent of the institution. He had lived in the school for fourteen years, and, in performing many official duties, had become well acquainted with its methods and aims. This was a period of great prosperity for the school, as Mr. Phillips was able to get increased appropriations from the Legislature--the sum of $3,000 was obtained for the purpose of opening a department for instruction in piano tuning and repairing; $4,000 was secured for enlarging and improving the Chapel and the dining room below. A kindergarden department was opened in the fall of 1889, during which year there were one hundred and eighty-eight students enrolled. In July, 1890, Mr. Phillips was succeeded by Mr. Frank H. Hall.

Frank Haven Hall was born in Maine in 1847 and died in Illinois in 1911. Although his active career in work

*Ibid, p. 34.

for the blind continued only twelve years, it was of great and lasting significance. "The keynote of his character was love of action toward a useful end."* For twenty-five years he had been teacher and superintendent in the public schools of Illinois when he came to the Institution for the Education of the Blind. Being wholly new to work for the blind--a methodical and thoughtful man--his first step was to make a visit of inspection to the schools for the blind in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Louisville. In Boston he became acquainted with, and was convinced of the possibilities of American Braille which had recently been invented and adopted in Perkins Institution. On going to New York, however, he met Mr. William B. Wait, inventor of the New York Point system, and that persuasive gentleman soon convinced him of the superiority of his type. Returning to Jacksonville, where some of the pupils had already begun to use Braille, he did all in his power to eradicate this pernicious habit--to make New York Point the one accepted system.

He was impressed by the difficulty and cost of producing embossed literature by the crude methods then in use, and set to work to devise a better one. His intention was to make a New York Point writer, similar to the ordinary typewriter, but the complications caused by the use of the variable base in that system forced the inventor to turn his attention to the fixed base Braille. On May

*John B. Curtis, Outlook for the Blind; volume XXI, p. 5.

20, 1892, the first Hall Braille Writer was completed. To quote from an account written at the time: "Under the direction of the superintendent a machine for writing Braille has been constructed by which the pupil can write many times as fast as he could write with a stylus and tablet, with the further advantage of having what he has written in a convenient position to be read."* One hundred of these machines were produced the first year, and were eagerly sought for by schools and individuals in all parts of the country and abroad. As companion to the Hall Braile Writer, the Hall Stereotype Maker was completed January 5, 1893. This machine, designed for impressing Braille dots in a metal sheet for use in printing, is capable of a speed of over four letters or signs per second, and has made possible the production of comparatively inexpensive Braille books. Dr. French, in his book, "From Homer to Helen Keller," says of the Hall Braille Writer and its inventor: "In the year 1892 there appeared one of those simple inventions, scarcely thought of at the time, not welcomed with noisy acclaim, but destined to make far-reaching revolutionary changes. Not enough credit has been given Frank H. Hall for his part in the education of the blind. When that credit is duly given, his name will stand with those of Hauy, Klein, Howe, and Braille. It is perhaps not too much to say that these names should be ranked with those of the greatest educators of the last century and a half." It was by Mr. Hall's sugges-

*A Brief History of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind, p. 40.

tion, and through his influence, that the first plan for educating the blind in Braille classes in the public schools was inaugurated in Chicago in 1900. His motto he kept always well in mind--"Knowledge that can be made the basis of action for each pupil is the knowledge that pupils should seek."*

Although Mr. Hall's connection with the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind was ended in 1902, he continued during the remainder of his life to take an active interest in the education of the blind, supporting movements which he thought would advance the cause. As the first forty-six years of the existence of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind, ending at the close of Mr. Hall's first administration in July, 1893, has been the period of its growth from an idea accidentally planted in the mind of Samuel Bacon to an institution of almost its present size--with two hundred and forty-one students enrolled in 1893--the second half of its record is mainly expressed in the expansion of its activities and the improvement of its facilities to meet the needs of its pupils. During these later years, Mr. Robert W. Woolston has been principally responsible for making it what it now is. Born in Council Bluffs, Iowa, October 29, 1872, he completed work in Wheaton Academy, taught a year in public school, and then continued his education at Wheaton College. Graduating in the spring of 1903, he came to the institution in the fall of that year as teacher in the high school, and his work there with

*John B. Curtis, Outlook for the Blind, Vol. XXI, p. 5.

blind children has hardly been interrupted since. He became Managing Officer in 1916, and was later instrumental in having the name officially changed from the "Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind" to the "Illinois School for the Blind." This simplification of title exemplifies one of his principal endeavors--to make the School for the Blind as nearly like a school for sighted children as is possible. In his own words: "Since I have been Superintendent here we have built a new school, having spent more than a million dollars in the erection of nine new buildings, and our graduates are eligible to enroll in colleges and universities."

The most significant efforts of the school are in the literary department. Blind boys and girls four years old are taken into the kindergarden, thence through the elementary school, graded as in the public school, and a complete high school course, graduation from which makes students eligible for college entrance without further preparation.

Supplementing the work of the literary department are those devoted to handicraft, music, and physical education as well as sight-saving classes. A library and printing department also make vital contributions.

In his Annual Report for 1941 Mr. Woolston says of the vocational department: "At all times those connected with this department are on the lookout for additional sub-

jects to be taught to help to broaden the narrow field of work available to the blind. Our desire is that every boy and girl could learn to make their own living. When we realize that this is not true of the public schools we know that it cannot be so of ours but we are striving to make each one able, if possible, to be a useful member of his own community." In addition to the subjects usually taught, the boys receive instruction in fibre furniture making, repair of electrical equipment, and upholstery, while the girls learn dressmaking and cooking.

About ten years ago this school was the first of its kind in the country to initiate sight-saving classes for the benefit of those students whose sight was insufficient to permit them to receive adequate training without eyestrain, in public schools and, at the same time, is too great for the ordinary methods of educating the blind to be helpful.

In the library--now known as the Illinois Library for the Blind--which, in addition to serving the needs of the school, supplies reading matter to blind people all over the state and to some outside, there are approximately 13,000 volumes of Braille and 850 cases of Talking Book records. Under the able direction of its blind librarian, Miss Frauncie E. Moon, this regional distributing branch of the Library of Congress has developed a service effective in meeting the needs of its four hundred readers.

The printing department which was equipped to print

Boston Line and other embossed types before Mr. Hall's superintendency, was greatly improved after the invention of the Stereotype Maker. As the American Printing House for the Blind, in Louisville, Kentucky, supplies all textbooks used in the school, this shop has for many years specialized in the field of Braille Music. Mr. Louis W. Rodenberg, its director, devised in 1919, a method of arranging music in Braille notation, known as "bar over bar", which greatly simplified the interpretation of the music. His work in this field has been widely recognized--his method is nationally used, and there is a great demand among schools and individuals for the Braille music which this shop can supply. Mr. Rodenberg represented the United States at an international conference which met in Paris in 1928 and achieved a worldwide agreement on useage of Braille symbols in music, so that music printed anywhere can be universally read and understood. In 1932 he was again sent to Europe this time as a member of the Uniform Type Commission, which, with a similar committee from England, met in London and arranged a revised form of British Braille grade Two called Standard English Braille--a system which is now used throughout the English-speaking world. The year after this meeting Mr. Rodenberg joined with a committee of teachers from the Division of Visitation of the Adult Blind, and together they produced the Standard Braille Series-- a primer in three parts designed for the instruction, by easy stages, of adults learning Braile Grade

Two. This primer is printed and distributed not only for the use of Illinois Home Teachers, but wherever such a book is needed, and it is thought by many to be the best vehicle yet devised for the purpose. In June, 1943, Mr. Rodenberg, was presented with the "Migel Medal" in recognition of his efforts in promoting international uniformity in Braille music and literary Braille and for his contributions to literature on work for the blind.

In the ninety-four years since the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind was opened, many and vital changes have occurred. The number of students enrolled each year has grown to two hundred and forty. The courses of instruction have been expanded until they have the scope of the public school curriculum. Music, which was at first thought to be most important as a means of earning a living, has become more an avocation and less a vocation, and this is expressed in the decreasing emphasis laid on this phase of education. Strict segregation of the sexes, long traditional, has gradually been giving way to a more liberal policy--boys and girls of all ages now have parties, dances, picnics, and other forms of recreation, as well as classes, together, and thus a more normal social training is possible.

No standard methods existed in the early days for the teaching of the blind but now, through the "Teachers' Forum" and with the assistance of the American Foundation for the Blind, instruction is constantly being improved--

new apparatus, such as the Talking Book, is being experimented with, to see what contribution it can make; new methods, such as in the sight-saving classes, are being used which are better adapted to the needs of the individual pupil; and new courses, such as that in dramatics, which instructs in a useful art, as well as developing poise, assurance, and normal behavior, are being instroduced.

Progress has been constant toward a school which will fulfill the same aims as those of a school for the sighted--to prepare the student with the equipment he will need to fill his role in life, as the concept of that role has changed from that of an object of public charity to one in which the blind person takes the same position in his community that he would take if he could see.

## Bibliography

All of the historical material used in the first part of this paper was taken from "A Brief History of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind located at Jacksonville, Illinois," presented by the Illinois Board of World's Fair Commissioners-1893.

Information on the life and work of Frank H. Hall from articles in the Outlook for the Blind, particularly volume XXI, p. 5.

Information on the present Illinois School for the Blind from the Annual Reports of that institution for 1937 and 1941; and "The Education of the Blind (A Symposium) by several Teachers--Illinois School for the Blind"; a letter from Robert W. Woolston, and from Articles in the "Illinois Braille Messenger."

Also a quotation from Dr. French's book--"From Homer to Helen Keller."